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ABSTRACT

The Test of Pragmatic Language (TOPL) is an individually administered instrument designed to assess pragmatic language skills that can be used with students in kindergarten through high school. It is more specifically intended for use with children, adolescents, and adults with learning disabilities, language delays, reading difficulties, or aphasia. It is said to provide information on six dimensions of pragmatic language: physical setting, audience, topic, purpose, visual-gestural cues, and abstraction. The 44-item test is accompanied by an examiner's manual, scoring materials, and the test-picture book. The normative sample consisted of 1,016 examinees from the United States (24 states) and Canada (1 province), representative with regard to sex, residence, race/ethnicity, geographic region, and age. Overall validity findings about the test have been acceptable, although limited by small sample size and some lack of information about student age or grade level. Previous reviews have generally supported the usefulness of the TOPL, although two reviewers have suggested that more information is needed to relate actual test items to the defined six areas, and one reviewed has pointed out some limitations in the applicability of the TOPL pictures to all students. The TOPL appears to be a tool to provide a profile of pragmatic or social language skills. (Contains five references.) (SLD)

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Test of Pragmatic Language: A Review and Critique

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General Information

Test Title: Test of Pragmatic Language (TOPL)
Authors: Diana Phelps-Terasaki and Trisha Phelps-Gunn
Publisher: Pro-ed
Publication Date: 1992
Time Required for Administration: 30-45 minutes
Cost: $84 per complete kit, $29 per examiner's manual, $29 per TOPL picture book, $29 per 25 TOPL profile/examiner record forms.

Brief Description of Purpose and Nature of Test

The TOPL is an individually administered instrument designed to assess pragmatic language skills. The test can be used with students from kindergarten through high school age. More specifically, it is intended for use with children, adolescents and adults with learning disabilities, language delays or disorders, reading difficulties and adult aphasic populations. It is also designed for use with children and adolescents in ESL programs as well as family therapy or substance abuse treatment programs. The TOPL is a verbal measure which is said to provide information on six dimensions of pragmatic language: physical setting, audience, topic, purpose (speech acts), visual-gestural cues, and abstraction. The test can be used as part of a battery of psychological tests to assist in a more comprehensive assessment of social skills and language use. The manual reports that the TOPL has 3 major purposes: to identify students who are below their peers in pragmatic language skills, to determine strengths and weaknesses of an individual's pragmatic language skills, and to documents students progress as a result of an intervention. The TOPL consists of 44 items, many of which have corresponding pictures, which require a verbal response from the examiner. The pictures are black and white drawings depicting various activities in a number of

settings. Examinee's responses are scored as 1-acceptable or 0-unacceptable. Samples of each are provided on the Profile/Examiner Record Form. Test time is generally 30 to 45 minutes, but testing can be extended over several sessions for individuals with more severe language difficulties. The TOPL yields one score which is easily converted to a percentile rank, quotient score, and age equivalent score.

Practical Evaluation

The TOPL materials are packaged in an easily transportable carrying case which includes the examiner's manual, profile/examiner record form (used for scoring) and the picture book. The 45 page technical manual is well-organized with clear directions for administration and scoring of the test. In addition, it provides detailed information on norms, validity and reliability. As mentioned previously, the picture book is composed of black and white pictures illustrating a variety of scenarios. However, there is no picture stand incorporated into the design of the book, nor is one provided. Thus, the examiner will have to determine the best way to present the picture to the student without interfering with their ability to score the examinee's responses. The Profile/Examiner Record Form is used to record scores and other notations related to student responses. It explains each item including which picture to show, what to say, and how to score the response.

Directions in both the manual and record form are easy to follow; however, they failed to include guidelines or a script for an introduction. Without guidelines for an introduction each examiner is free to decide what information to give the client about the purpose and nature of the test. The lack of uniform guidelines for an introduction could lead to greater variability in the administration of the test.

The TOPL can be administered by anyone who is competent in the administration of tests in education, speech-language pathology, or psychology (Phelps-Terasaki & Phelps-Gunn, 1992). The authors suggest that the examiner become familiar with the manual and practice administering the test before a formal assessment. A qualified and well prepared examiner is especially important when assessment is used in part to determine educational placement (i.e. special education).

The scoring procedures for the TOPL are very straightforward. The raw score is the total number of correct responses provided by the test-taker. To ensure more accurate scoring the examiner may want to utilize a tape recorder to allow for greater evaluation of students responses. With careful attention to directions and a well-prepared examiner, administration of the TOPL is fairly easy.

Technical Evaluation

The normative sample is representative of the national population with 1,016 examinees from 24 states and one Canadian providence. The sample was representative with regard to sex, residence, race/ethnicity, geographic region, and age. A better sample would have addressed socioeconomic level and relevant personality characteristics (Anastasi, 1988). Normative scores are reported as quotients (with mean of 100 and standard deviation of 15), percentiles, and age equivalents at each 6 month interval. The authors realized the importance of converting raw scores into various forms; thus procedures for converting scores were included in the manual. The authors caution that age equivalents are easily misinterpreted and should only be used when federal or state departments require them (Phelps-Terasaki & Phelps-Gunn, 1992). Norms are provided for students age 5-13. A primary concern of this review

was the authors suggestion that the TOPL is appropriate for use with high school age students and adults despite the lack of norms provided for those age groups. After careful examination of the manual, it appears the authors intended the TOPL to be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of older persons language skills rather than evaluating their performance utilizing the normative data. This does appear to be viable.

The manual provides information on reliability through internal consistency, interscorer reliability, and the standard error of measurement. All internal consistency coefficients were above .80 except at age 6 which was .74. The average coefficient was .82 which is acceptable for test users to interpret results. The interscorer reliability is much more acceptable with a coefficient of .99. The average standard error of measurement is 6.3 on the quotient scale, with a range from 5.0 to 7.6.

With respect to validity, the manual provides information on content, criterion-related, and construct validity. For content validity the authors point to item selection and item analysis procedures described in a previous section of the manual. However, this section fails to provide information linking the six sub-components of language (i.e. setting, audience, topic, etc.) to actual test items. There is no specific information detailing which items address some or all of the previously mentioned components of language. Criterion-related validity was evaluated in terms of concurrent validity. Evidence was collected by asking teachers to rate the pragmatic language skills of 30 students who were given the TOPL (Phelps-Terasaki & Phelps-Gunn, 1992). The coefficient was .82 which supports the existence of concurrent validity; however, the result is limited by the small sample size (n=30).

Construct validity was evaluated in terms of six basic constructs: age differentiation, relationship of the TOPL to spoken language, relationship of the TOPL to school achievement, relationship of the TOPL to tests of mental ability, group differentiation of verbal abilities, and item validity. Support for construct validity is provided by age differentiation correlations. As students grow older their pragmatic language skills increase thus TOPL scores increase. To illustrate whether the TOPL relates to measures of spoken language, 30 students (grades k-2) were administered the language subtest of Screening Children for Related Early Educational Needs (SCREEN) (Hresko, Reid, Hammill, Ginsburg, & Baroody, 1988). The resulting coefficient was .70 which provides evidence for construct validity. To test the relationship between the TOPL and school achievement, 30 students (grade k-2) Math, Writing, and Reading subtests scores on the SCREEN were correlated with their TOPL scores. The resulting coefficients were .32, .39, and .55,respectively, suggesting they are related concepts. The relationship between the TOPL score and tests of mental ability was demonstrated by correlating the Scholastic Aptitude Scale Scores for 27 students with their TOPL scores. The resulting coefficient was .68, again providing support for construct validity; however no information was provided as to the grade level of the 27 students. All of these findings are limited by the small sample size. For group differentiation of verbal abilities, TOPL scores of 24 students identified as having language disabilities were examined. The average TOPL quotient score was 87 which is below average thereby providing support for construct validity. With regards to item validity, the authors selected items which yielded at least a .30 point biserial (discriminating power) coefficient in discriminating between the item and the total test score.. Based on the

item selection procedures the TOPL test items do provide evidence of item validity. Overall, the validity findings are acceptable; however, they are limited by the utilization of a small sample and in some cases lack of information detailing the age or grade level of the students participating in the sample.

Reviewers Comments

Previous reviews of the TOPL by Ochoa (1995) and Wilkinson (1995) provide support for the utility of the TOPL while raising concerns about certain aspects of the instrument. Ochoa suggests more validity studies be conducted, and information on test-retest reliability may be beneficial. In addition, his review raises concerns about pictures #20 and #28. Picture #20 depicts a record player which may go unrecognized by younger examinees since records have been replaced by Compact Discs. Picture #28 depicts children building a snowman. This is a concern because some students, depending their geographic location, may not have seen snow and therefore cannot relate to the activity being demonstrated. In Wilkinson's review, he raises questions about the interscorer reliability reported in the manual. Since the scorers were the test authors one would expect a high interscorer reliability coefficient. Wilkinson suggests field testing of interscorer reliability is warranted. Wilkinson also suggests a couple of additional precautionary directions be included in the manual: a) the need to administer all items, b) caution against accidentally administering a picture number instead of an item number—since not all items have corresponding pictures. Both reviewers agree more information is needed relating actual test items to the six sub-components of pragmatic language stated by the authors. Finally, they agree that the TOPL is a useful tool for providing an in-depth screening of pragmatic language.

Summary Evaluation

The TOPL is a useful tool in the assessment of pragmatic or social language skills of an individual. Specifically, it can be used for identifying persons with language difficulties, assessing a their strengths and weaknesses, or documenting progress of persons participating in an intervention. While the TOPL was developed with a nationally representative sample, test authors should consider additional validity studies utilizing larger and more diverse samples. The TOPL materials are well-written, easy to follow, and neatly packaged. Nevertheless, future versions should include a stand for the picture book as well as guidelines for an introduction for examiners to read before evaluation begins. Finally, better efforts should be made to demonstrate the relationship between test items and the six dimensions of pragmatic language. In sum, the TOPL works well in conjunction with other language assessment measures for diagnosis purposes, but it works best as a tool to provide a profile of a persons pragmatic or social language skills.

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